

The White Bird

A Devonshire Story

By Jessie Adelaide Middleton

The Oxenham family has been settled at South Tawton for many generations. Southsele was largely owned by them. One member of it was the famous John Oxenham who went with Francis Drake to Nombre de Dios in 1570, and was eventually captured by the Spaniards and hung as a pirate. Readers will remember that his story is told in Kingsley's *Westward Ho!* Chapter II is headed, "How Mr. Oxenham saw the white bird," and contains a vivid description of Oxenham seeing the bird while drinking a toast.

"He lifted his cup and was in the act to pledge them, when he suddenly dropped it on the table and pointed, staring and trembling, up and round the room, as if following some fluttering object.

" 'There! Do you see it? The bird!—the bird with the white breast!'

"Mr. Leigh, who was present, thereupon remarked to Sir Richard Grenville—

" 'That bird has been seen for generations, before the death of any of his family. I know those who were at South Tawton when his mother died, and his brother also, and they both saw it. God help him! for after all he is a proper man!' "

There are monuments in South Tawton Church to the Oxenham and Battishill families. Oxenham Manor House is now in possession of Sir Henry Hugh Hoare, Bath., of Stourhead, Bath. The present house is modern—built about 1714—but full of old associations and traditions, among them being a legend that Lady Margaret Oxenham was going to be married, when, on her wedding morning, a white bird appeared and hovered over her, and she was stabbed at the altar of South Tawton Church by a rejected lover.

The story of the white bird and its various appearances to members of the family as a deathwarning is one that is bound up in the annals of Devonshire. It is so curious and interesting that, although an old story, it will certainly bear retelling, so I have gathered together all the available evidence concerning it from various sources.

In an old brown leather-covered book containing some rare and ancient tracts I found one which gives the story—down to a certain point—in the quaint phraseology of that day. It is entitled— "A true relation of An Apparition in the likenesse of a Bird with a white breast that appeared hovering over the Death-Beds of some of the children of Mr. James Oxenham, of Sale Monachorum, Devon, Gent. Confirmed by Sundry Witnesses as followeth in the ensuing Treatise.

London: Printed by I.O. for Richard Clutter-buck. And are sold at the Sign of the Gun in Little Brittain neere S. Botolph's Church. 1641."

The frontispiece of the tract is divided into four compartments, in each of which is a picture of a dying person, over whose bed a bird like a dove is hovering.

At the foot of each picture is an inscription, as follows—

"I. John Oxenham, Gentleman, Aged 21. Died with this aparition above. Witnesses Robert Woolley and Humphrey King.

"2. Thomasin, the wife of James Oxenham the younger, Gentleman. Aged 22. Died with ye like Aparition. Witenesse Elizabeth Frost and Ioane Tooker.

“3. Rebecka Oxenham. Aged 8. Died with the same Aparition. Witsnesse Eliz. Auerie, widdow, and Mary Stephens.

“4. Tomasin, a Child in a cradle. Died with ye like Aparition. Witsnesse Eliz. Auerie and Mary Stephens.”

The opening words of the book have no particular bearing on the facts, but later on the story is unfolded as follows—

“In this following discourse, what is or shall bee spoken of the parties shall not be tainted with flatteries, but shall bee warrantably true, as by the testimonies of divers sufficient witnesses may appeare who are yet alive, being good and religious people, and the pastor of the place, a man of able paths, and of an holy conversation who doe give in testimony for the confirmation of what is here recorded. The place where they dwelled, being not in any remote region, but at home the time when it fell out, being but (as I may say) as yesterday; some foure or five years ago. And the parties who died being of no obscure birth, but of good rank and repute in their native countries, there all being by a reverend Father of our Church strictly examined concerning the premises; who, finding all their sayings to bee true and just hath given approbation for a Monument to be erected in the Church, for the perpetual¹ memorial¹ of the fact, which was accordingly performed by the care and labour of Edward Marshall, tomb-maker, under St. Dunstan’s Church, in the West in Fleet Street; of whom, if any that doubt, may receive ample satisfaction. All things considered, it will easily appeare that it is no Popish relation, or lying Legend to gull and deceive people, but a true and reall thing lately done, the particulars whereof follow in order.

“In the parish called Sale-Monarchorun,¹ in the County of Devon, there lives one James Oxenham, a Gentleman of good worth and quality, who had many children, one whereof was called John Oxenham, a young man in the vigour, beautie and flower of his age, about 22, who was of stature comely and tall, being in height of body six foote and an halfe; a very proper person, and for the endowments and gifts of his minde richly qualified; much addicted to pious and religious exercises (a rare practice in these licentious times) for young men to imitate.

“This young gentleman fell sick, who being visited by many of the neighbours during the time of his sicknesse, departed this transitory life on the fifth day of September, 1635 to whom, two days before he yealded up his Soule to God, there appeared the likenesse of a bird with a white breast, hovering over him. And so, he setting himself for his happy departure, yealded up his Spirit to Him that gave it, with manifest and comfortable expressions of his faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And for the confirmation of this appearance there are two honest and substantiall men who were then present, to take away all sinister suspition and doubt—Robert Woodley and Humphrey King, who were not by any awards hired to speake so, but when they were examined freely justified by the same, both to the Minister of the parish, by the appoyntment of the reverend Father in God, Joseph Bishop of Exeter.

“He was no sooner dead in this pious manner, but the same apparition did againe show itself to Thomazine, the wife of James Oxenham, the younger gentleman, about eleven of the clocke at night. Which Thomazine was a woman of a blamelesse and unspotted life, striving to keep a good conscience towards God and man: keeping (as St. James speakes)

¹ Now Zeal Manachorum, N. Devon.

herself unspotted of the world, who also was diligent in the performance of Christian duties and was loving and amiable to her husband

“Shee dyed to the comfort of all about her the seveneth of September, in the year 1635, and that the likenesse of such a Bird hovered over her, before her giving up her soule, as appears by the testimony of two women who were present, by name Elizabeth Frost and Joan Tooker, who were likewise examined concerning the truth of this before the aforesaid Minister. And though there bee many who perhaps may say alas! these were but women and so no heed to be taken to their words, it is answered: Are not women of the same household of faith with men? . . .

Not long after but Rebeccah, the sister of the aforesaid Thomazine, aged about eight yeares, to whom about eleven of the clocke of the night appeared the Bird in the same likenesse and hovered over her. She was a virgin of great hopes and wondrous docile, of a gentle and courteous behaviour to all. She dyed in a peaceable manner, the ninth of September, 1635, prayer having beene publicly by the Minister, with the Congregation, made for her recovery, she departed. The witnesses of the aforesaid Apparition by name Elizabeth Avery and Mary Stephens.

“And she was no sooner dead but Thomazine, a little Child of the aforesaid James Oxenham, and Thomazine, his wife, being in a cradle fell sicke, over whom did presently appear the said Bird, in forme as aforesaid, and so she dyed the fifteenth of September, 1635. Witnesses to this the same two afore named, Elizabeth Avery and Mary Stephens.

“And what is more, the said Bird appeared to Grace, the grandmother of the said John, over her death-bed. Which said Grace was a vertuous woman and full of good works, and yeelded herself into the hands of her Maker with great cheerfulness and willingnesse, in the yeare of our Redemption, 1618.

“And to shut up all, there were foure more of the said family and kindred, who were sicke, and yet did never see or perceive any such apparition, and recovered their former health speedily, to the glory of God, and comfort of their friends.

“Now briefly; if there were no such thing, how came some to see it at severall times, upon the sickness of severall parties, and all of them did perceive it in one and the same shape. . .”

The rest of the book is devoted to arguments in favour of supernatural apparitions based *ofl* passages from the Bible.

It will be remembered that in the beginning of this quaint narrative reference is made to a monument which was to be erected in the church embodying the facts, and was made by Edward Marshall, tomb-maker under St. Dunstan’s. We hear no more about this stone until we find a reference to it in the *Epistolæ Ho-Eliañæ* of Howell (who was one of the clerks of the Privy Council of Charles II), published four or five years later. Howell writes—

“*To Mr. F. D.*

“As I passed by St. Dunstan’s, in Fleet Street, the last Saturday, I stepp’d into a Lapidary or Stone-Cutter’s shop, to treat with the Master for a Stone to be put upon my Father’s Tomb. And casting my eies up and down, I might spit a huge Marble, with a large inscription upon’s which was thus, to my best remembrance.”

Here follow the inscriptions to John, Mary, “another sister,” James and Elizabeth Oxenham, mentioning the appearance of the bird; and Howell adds: “The stone is to be sent to a Town hard by Excester, wher this happened.”

When and where was the Oxenham tablet set up in a church?

After very careful investigation, I find that not a trace of it can be found. Polwhele, Lysons, Prince and others, writing about Devonshire, mention the story of the white bird of the Oxenhams, but give no clue to the whereabouts of the stone, the authenticity of which is vouched for by Howell, as well as the unknown writer of the tract. Howell actually *saw* the stone. He quoted the inscriptions, as he says, from memory, and the names differ from those given in the tract, but the fact remains that he certainly saw and carefully examined the monument.

As for the episode of the appearance of the white bird, its authenticity does not rest solely on the lost tombstone, as I will show.

Having read what Polwhele and the others had to say about the Oxenham story and the marble tomb, I fortunately stumbled upon a most interesting lecture given by the late Mr. Richard XV. Cotton on “The Oxenham Omen,” read by him at Crediton, and published by the Devonshire Association. Mr. Cotton, while referring to the tract, Lyson’s *Magna Brittainia*, Howell, Polwhele, Prince and my other authorities, adds some interesting evidence of his own, on what he admits is “a confirmed family belief.”

Dr. Plot, the antiquary, he says, sought the missing stone, but unsuccessfully. He also refers to a manuscript copy of a letter quoted in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* by Mr. W. S. Gibson, which gives an account of an appearance of the bird in 1743.

“I have received an answer from the country’, in relation to the strange bird which appeared to Mr. Oxenham just before his death, and the account which Dr. Batie gave to Lord Abingdon of it is certainly true.

“It first was seen outside the window, and soon afterwards by Mrs. Oxenham in the room which she mentioned to Mr. Oxenham, and asked him if he knew what bird it was. ‘Yes,’ said he, ‘it has been upon my face and head, and is recorded in history as always appearing in our family before their deaths, but I shall cheat the bird.’²

“Nothing more was said about it, nor was the bird taken notice of from that time; but he died soon afterwards. However odd the affair may seem, it is certainly true, for the account was given of it by Mrs. Oxenham herself, but she never mentions it to any one, unless particularly asked about it; and as it was seen by several persons at the same time, I cannot attribute it to imagination, but must leave it as a phenomenon unaccounted for.”

The letter, according to Mr. Gibson, appears to have been written not very long after the death of William Oxenham, December 10, 1743. As regards its authenticity, Mr. Cotton has much to say in its favour that is interesting, but too long to reproduce here.

Lysons treats the appearance of the bird to William Oxenham as “a supposition,” but gives the same version of the story on the authority of a note in the MS. collection of William Chapple of Risdon. Dr. Bertie was, Mr. Cotton infers, the Hon. Charles Berti~, LL.D., son of James, first Earl of Abingdon. No doubt the omen, he says, was discussed in pris~ate circles at the time of Mr. Oxenham’s death.

Another appearance of the bird is graphically described by a medical man named Dr. Mogridge, who wrote an old and scarce book called *A Sketch of Sidmouth*.

² It is rather an odd coincidence that after the appearance of the death omen to Lord Lyttelton, he remarked, the night he died, “I shall bilk the ghost.”

In it he mentioned the old brick mansion in which one of the Oxenhams died, and inserts an extract from a letter written to him by a valued friend, which runs as follows—

“My dear sir, I give you, as well as I can recollect, the anecdote related to me by a late respected baronet in this county. He told me that, having read in Howell’s *Anecdotes* of the singular appearance of a white bird flying across or hovering about the lifeless body of the different members of the Devonshire Oxenham family immediately after dissolution, and also having heard the tradition in other quarters, wishing rather for an opportunity of refuting the superstitious assertion than from an idea of meeting with anything like confirmation; having occasion to come to Sidmouth shortly after the death of his friend Mr. Oxenham, who resided in an old mansion, not now standing, and the place of which is now occupied by the houses called ‘Sidlands,’ he questioned the old gardener who had the care of the house as to who attended his master when he died, as Mr. O. had gone there alone, meaning only to remain a day or two.

“ ‘I and my wife, sir,’ was the reply.

“ ‘Were you in the room when he expired?’

“ ‘Yes, both of us.’

“ ‘Did anything in particular take place at that time?’

“ ‘No, sir, nothing.’ Then, after a moment’s pause: ‘There was, indeed, something which I and my wife could almost swear we saw, which was a white bird fly in at the door, dart across the bed and go into one of those drawers; and as it appeared in the same way to both of us, we opened all the drawers to find it, but where it went to we never could discover.’

“If I recollect rightly, the man, on being questioned, had not heard of the tradition respecting such appearances, and that he was not prepared by previous instruction to confirm the story seems more than probable by his only mentioning it at second thought, as though he hardly supposed the baronet’s inquiry had reference to anything supernatural, and by his not more positively making the assertion, which it seems probable he would have done had he any end to answer by making up the story.”

This old mansion is no longer in existence, having been pulled down.

“Mr. Mogridge, in commenting upon the incident, did not seem to doubt that it was a special supernatural revelation,” adds Mr. Cotton; and he goes on to say that this Mr. Oxenham, who lived in Sidmouth for many years, died between the years 1810 and 1821.

Mr. Cotton then relates the well-known appearance of the phenomenon, given on the authority

of the Rev. Henry Nutcombe Oxenham, the present (?) head of his family, to the Rev. Frederick George Lee, for the latter’s book, *Glimpses of the Supernatural*. Mr. Cotton was favoured with a fuller account by the Rev. Henry Oxenham, part of which runs as follows— “Shortly before the death of my late uncle,

G. N. Oxenham, Esq., of 17, Earl’s Terrace, Kensington, who was then head of the family, this occurred: His only surviving daughter, now Mrs. Thomas Peter, but then unmarried and living at home, and a friend of my aunt’s, Miss Roberts, who happened to be staying in the house, but was no relation, and had never heard of the family tradition, were sitting in the dining-room immediately beneath his bedroom about a week before his death, which took place on December 15, 1873, when their attention was roused by a shouting outside the window.

“On looking out, they observed a white bird— which might have been a pigeon, but, if so, was an unusually large one—perched on the thorn tree outside the windows, and it remained there for several minutes, in spite of some workmen on the opposite side of the road throwing their hats at it, in the vain effort to drive it away.

“Miss Roberts mentioned this to my aunt at the time, though not, of course, attaching any special significance to it, and my aunt (since deceased) repeated it to me soon after my uncle’s death. Neither did my cousin, though aware of the family tradition, think of it at the time.

Miss Roberts we have lost sight of for some years, and do not even know if she is still living; but Mrs. Thomas Peter confirms in every particular the accuracy of this statement. Of the fact, therefore, there can be no reasonable doubt, whatever interpretation may be put upon it. My cousin also mentioned another circumstance, which either I did not hear of or had forgotten, viz, that my late aunt spoke at the time of frequently hearing a sound like the fluttering of a bird’s wings in my uncle’s bedroom, and said that the nurse testified to hearing it also.”

This was the last appearance, so far as can be ascertained, of the white bird of the Oxenhams. A white bird has always been considered as a messenger of death, and one example of its appearance in that capacity is the Lyttelton Ghost Story, which I related fully in my *Grey Ghost Book*. Indeed, there are scores of instances on record in which the white bird has come as a deathwarning; far too many to touch upon here. But I will conclude with an instance given me by Mrs. Golding Bright, the brilliant writer who veils her identity under the pen-name of “George Egerton.” Mrs. Bright’s mother belonged to a well-known Welsh family, and was the daughter of Admiral George-Bynon. A white bird always appeared as a death-warning to members of the family, and Mrs. Bright tells me she well remembers her mother crying bitterly one day because a strange-looking white bird had come into the house and fluttered about the room. She looked upon it as a certain omen of death, and so, indeed, it proved, for her mother died the following day.